

## **Christ, Truth, and Politics\***

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*Pilate saith unto him, What is truth? (John 18:38)*

It is interesting to note that the only instance where Christ ever met Pilate in recounted history was at His trial. The ensuing dialogue between both of them is intriguing. It heavily concentrates on the urgency of Truth in a world mismanaged by humans.

The trial of Christ at Jerusalem reminds us of the trial of Socrates at Athens. Tertullian might have been too quick to retort “What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem?” The unjust sentence of Socrates explicitly points out the fact that the greatest problem with humanity is not that it has not known the truth but that, to the contrary, having understood the ramifications of truth it has suppressed it and chosen to put an end to any voice that speaks on behalf of it. Weren’t there at least 80, of the earlier 220 who voted Socrates as innocent, who also later voted for his death penalty? Truth had less significance in the democratic Athens, whose laws Socrates himself highly respected. In Jerusalem as well, though Christ’s sentence was not decided through a Jury based on votes, yet it was the voice of the mob that prevailed against the truth. The obvious truth was that Pilate had found nothing worth condemning in Jesus. Yet, however, he talked of the Passover custom of releasing a prisoner and had Christ whipped despite the evidence that Christ was not a criminal.

The contrast between Socrates and Jesus is high at the point where Jesus begins to speak of a kingdom beyond this world and of His coming to bear witness to the truth. While for Socrates, truth had to be discovered through rational analysis, Christ claimed to know the truth and be a witness to the truth. While Socrates didn’t find any meaning in a world beyond Athens, Christ talked of a kingdom that transcends all spatial-temporal existence.

Pilate’s question to Jesus as to what was truth insinuates several meanings. He might have meant “Does truth mean anything at all?” or “What is truth in this situation?” or “Is truth absolute or relative?” or “Do politics and truth go together?” or “Even if there is something called Truth, is there any significance to it?” or “What truth are you talking about?” Whatever the import of the question was, the fact remains that Pilate found nothing appealing in any understanding of truth in a world that relativized everything to suit its selfish purposes.

Pilate had already become infamous for his hard ways of dealing with mobs. Josephus tells us of Pilate’s aversion of Jewish religious interference in his political moves. For instance, when he brought Roman banners with Caesar’s image on them, the Jews protested. He tried to put them down by deploying his troops only to find out that these people were committed to their religion more than they were committed to Caesar. In another instance, he sent his soldiers dressed in tunics to infiltrate the crowd and beat the offenders with clubs. They had protested against his secular employment of temple treasure. And so, now, when the Jews come to him with Jesus, he straight away dismisses them with the words “Take ye him, and judge him according to your law.” When they insist that he was a political malefactor, he takes him aside and asks him some questions only to find out that the Jews who once protested against the images of Caesar were now using the name of Caesar to get rid of Jesus. Later, Pilate finds himself accused of enmity against Caesar on grounds that he wished the release of Jesus. Understanding the breadth of experience Pilate had in politics, it is not

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amazing that his famous question “What is truth?” comes in response to Jesus’ statement that He was a King and had come into the world to bear witness to the truth. How could one be a King and also bear witness to the truth at the same time. Was the Roman Empire ready for such news?

Several centuries later, an Italian political philosopher by the name of Machiavelli was to write that a ruler is not bound by traditional ethical norms and is free to use whatever means available for his political purposes. His principles of power politics came to be known as Machiavellianism. Machiavelli proposed that it was better that a ruler be both loved and feared; but, since a combination of both was too difficult, it was desirable that a ruler be feared though not loved. His formulation of such principles was allegedly drawn from studies in Roman political history and the politics of his age. Unquestionably, tyranny and despotism are perfect possibilities in a political system that doesn’t recognize the sovereignty of God. Assuredly, every Nebuchadnezzar still needs a Daniel.

When questioned about His Kingship, Jesus promptly replied: “My kingdom is not of this world: if my kingdom were of this world, then would my servants fight, that I should not be delivered to the Jews: but now is my kingdom not from hence.” This clearly recognized that force was indispensable to kingdom. Puzzling, however, is the way Jesus uses the concept of kingdom. He distinguishes between two kinds of kingdom: one, of this world; another, not of this world. He claimed to be the King of the latter with an additional comment that His servants didn’t help Him now because His kingdom was not from here. The word used for ‘world’ here is *kosmos* (world, order), not *aion* (age, course). It denotes this very physical world order that we live in. Important is also the phrase *not from here*, which is to mean that Christ’s kingdom didn’t have its origin or basis in this world. It is from above even as Christ is from above (the second man). And the King of this other-worldly kingdom is a witness of truth. His passion for truth led Him to come to this world confused by raging falsehood and deception. He said that everyone that belonged to the truth heard His voice. He was the King of the Kingdom of Truth. A few chapters earlier, He claimed to be the personification of Truth itself so that anyone who believes in Him and follows Him is delivered from the falsehood of this-worldly glory (which truly is darkness) and transferred to His kingdom of light. Knowing Him is far more urgent than knowing several diverse truths. He is the Truth that connects together all truths of past, present, and future and fills them with transcendent and eternal meaning. Pilate could not hear Christ’s voice. Dazed by Christ’s statements, he retorted “What is truth?” and left without waiting for an answer.

Immediately, he goes out and declares to the Jews: “I find in him no fault.” That was the truth. However, he added: But ye have a custom that I should release unto you one at the passover: will ye therefore that I release unto you the King of the Jews?” That was the falsehood. Why talk of releasing Christ as a criminal when no fault indicting Him had been found in Him? The ethical relativism of this-worldly politics thickens still further when the crowd demands the release of a notorious robber (they could endure physical robbery as long as their spiritual status was left untouched and their *religiosity* approved of). Pilate scourges Jesus and lets his soldiers humiliate Him thinking, perhaps, that this would soften the violent temper of the crowd. He still tries to stick closer to justice and truth though the current is tearing him away from it.

Jesus had told him earlier that His kingdom was not of this world. Pilate still seems to be out of touch with the import of His word. He asks Him: “Where are you from?” Jesus gave no reply. Pilate says: “Do you not speak to me? Do you not know that I have authority to

crucify you, and I have authority to release you?” To which Jesus replies: “You could have no authority against Me unless it were given to you from above. Therefore he who delivered Me to you has the greater sin.” The relating of political authority to a transcendent Rulership above is significant. Hegel in his *Reason in History* writes regarding the role of the Divine in politics:

Religion is the sphere where a people gives itself the definition of what it regards as the True. Such a definition contains everything which belongs to the essence of the object, reducing its nature to a simple fundamental characteristic as focus for all other characteristics – the universal soul of all particulars. The idea of God thus is the general fundament of a people.

...secular existence is temporal and moves within private interest. Hence it is relative and unjustified. Its justification can only be derived from the absolute justification of its universal soul, its principle. And this is justified only as determination and existence of the essence of God. For this reason the State is based on religion.

Of course, Hegel writes of God, Religion, and Truth within the framework of his Phenomenology of the Spirit. But his insight into the necessity of truth and God as the unifying fundament of a people is great. Biblically speaking, God is the creator of man, and is the giver of not only political authority but also vision and direction to a nation. A nation which loses sight of God, will soon lose sight of practical value in truth and honesty. Private interest and engrossment with the present would reign high and become the ground for the release of despotism and tyranny. Jesus, by reminding Pilate that his authority was from above, was telling him that he was not autonomous in his field of politics. He was accountable to God. However, it is the one who handovers Jesus to Pilate that has the greater sin. Pilate has an opportunity to be just. He tries to release Jesus but is backfired by the crowd with the words: “If you let this man go, you are not Caesar's friend. Whoever makes himself a king speaks against Caesar.” Threatened by such accusation, Pilate gives in to the demand of the crowd and handovers Jesus to be crucified, at the same time referring to Jesus as the King of the Jews, to the chagrin of the priests who, themselves having succumbed to the relative situation, ironically exclaim that they have no king but Caesar. Pilate, however, doesn't stop here. He inscribes on the title on Jesus' cross the words JESUS OF NAZARETH, THE KING OF THE JEWS and refuses to change it despite the chief priests' protest. Somehow, Pilate seems to be attempting to stick close to the truth despite his obvious distance from it. He had already fallen prey to the public appeasement of secular politics. Truth had fallen in the earthly city.

But Christ, the Truth of God, did not die forever. He rose again on the third day. By His physical death on the cross, He put an end to the falsehood of this world order and rose again as the Firstfruits of a new world order founded on the very fulfillment of truth (His life and teaching), righteousness (His obedience), and justice (His sacrifice). If He didn't arise humanity would have been left without any hope of justice and a life eternal that transcended this world. But He rose again. And one day, He will come back to judge the world according to Truth (Romans 2:2). He will return in the glory of His kingdom (Mt. 16:28; 2 Tim. 4:1) to inaugurate a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness (2 Pt. 3:13).

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